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The Rural Teacher in the Early 1900s: Sentimental Image and Hard Reality

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My analysis attempts to reconcile conflicting images of the early 20th century rural teacher, contrasting popular nostalgia for schools of the past with a negative view from fiction and educational history. I conclude that the reality was diverse, and that the sentimentality of the period has colored popular retrospective views of its schools and teachers.

A deep and sentimental nostalgia for certain images of our national past is a recurring theme in American popular culture. Remembered or imagined settings are forever desired, forever recalled—yet hidden beneath a coat of sugary icing, concealing their reality. It is easy to call up some of these images. The warm kitchen of a prosperous farmhouse, filled with loving care and the rich aroma of apple pie; the summer days of a traditional country boyhood, quintessentially carefree and rebellious; the whole-hearted patriotism of a small-town Fourth of July, glowing with pride and community solidarity; a legislature or constitutional convention of the early republic, where wise and thoughtful representatives sat solemnly to weigh the needs of their neighbors and make rational decisions for the good of all. Another such setting is the one-room country school, home to happy, well-behaved children and ideal teacher.

Before going on to discuss our nostalgic memory of these schools more fully, it is important to recognize how the coating of sentiment overlying these images not only obscures for us the negative aspects of their reality but also makes it difficult for us to see what about them was both real and desirable, and might be revived or revisited to enhance our modern lives. For example, the life of the rural farmhouse was based on a level of physical work by both men and women that few would choose to undertake today, and must frequently have been pervaded by sadness caused by the early deaths of adults and children. Yet the unity and continuity of family was often maintained there in the face of formidable obstacles. The boys we remember playing through the summer often worked harder than most adults do now, and grew up with little education or knowledge of the world outside their neighborhoods. Yet they probably did claim freedom from adult restraints during some part of their childhood, an opportunity that the fears and pressures of the modern world deny to most children today.

Those happy Fourths were founded on an unquestioned faith in our national rightness that is a luxury we cannot afford in these times, and the unified communities that celebrated it were likely to exclude from their membership those perceived to be "different" in religion, ethnicity, or values. Yet those communities did know how to celebrate their shared values, and how to build bonds of care and concern among neighbors. Similarly, the remembered legislators were far from representative of those for whom they made decisions, were often narrow and exclusive in their views, but did embody a belief in the obligation of service to the community that is far from pervasive among well-educated and successful members of today's society (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985).

As these images appear, bathed in a golden aura of nostalgia and sentiment, we fail to discern in them what was *not* good in our national past, what we want to leave behind us. Equally, because our experience of modern life warns us that nothing lighted by that golden glow can be real, we are unable to find in these images of the past

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the benefits they might have for our present and future. This is particularly true of our image of the country school.

The popular American view of the history of schools has been characterized by nostalgia for the teachers, the classrooms, the students, and the curricula of the imagined rural past. The continuing popularity of images created by Norman Rockwell and of reprints of the McGuffey Readers are two indications of this nostalgia. In a remembered golden age of American education, many believe, learning and teaching were successful enterprises conducted in country and small-town schools by dedicated, competent, and morally superior teachers who maintained discipline and passed on important knowledge to well-behaved and willing students. These beliefs have led to a persistent demand for a return to the education of the past; if the past was perfect, how could we *not* want to return to it?

Sources and Methodology

This study began as an attempt to reconcile conflicting images of the early twentieth-century rural school, which I had accumulated over a number of years. I was aware of a popular nostalgia for the schools of the past, for the version of the rural school presented by Norman Rockwell and McGuffey's reader. Memories from reading of early twentieth century fiction seemed to contrast with this nostalgic image. Educational historians like Tyack (1974) presented a view of these schools that seemed substantially negative.

In an effort to gain better understanding of these images, I first returned to a reading of the kinds of novels I remembered, as well as some memoirs written by teachers from the period. Relying on the realistic nature of such fiction, I made notes of each incident that had to do with schooling, and began to see particular themes emerging from my reading. Later, seeking confirmation of the images I had found in fiction and memoir, I turned to texts intended to prepare teachers for service in rural schools, and searched for material on the same themes.

Limiting myself to novels published in the twentieth century, I read *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) by Kate Douglas Wiggin, now thought of as a "children's classic," but originally written for a general audience; and *A Daughter of the Land* (1918) by Gene Stratton-Porter and *Glenngarry School Days* (1902) by Ralph Connor, which are now very little read. I also included three of Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" books, which have enjoyed continuing popularity as children's books since they were published in the 1930s and 1940s. *Farmer Boy* (1933), *Little Town on the Prairie* (1941), and *These Happy Golden Years* (1943) each contain considerable material on rural schools.

The memoirs I read include those of Mary Ellen Chase (*A Goodly Fellowship* [1939]), Marshall A.Barber (*The Schoolhouse at Prairie View* [1938]), and Marion G. Kirkpatrick, (*The Rural School from Within* [1917]), as well as the briefer reminiscences of teachers from this period found in F.R. Donovan's sociological study, *The Schoolma'am* (1938) and in *Cloverdale: A Salute to One-Room Schoolteachers* by H.B. Christensen (1986).

The textbooks I read were written in the early 1900s, and had as their dual purpose to serve as (a) texts for the short courses offered at normal schools for the preparation of rural teachers, and (b) ready references on educational questions for those same teachers when they had returned to the isolated work of their rural schools. Of these, I read M. Carney's *Country Life and the Country School* (1912), J. Kennedy's *Rural Life and the Rural School* (1915), H.W. Foght's *The Rural Teacher and His Work* (1917), T.J. Woofter's *Teaching in Rural Schools* (1917), F.J. Lowth's *Everyday Problems of the Country Teacher* (1936), and J.R. Slacks' *The Rural Teacher's Work* (1938).

Reading these sources has led me to two general conclusions. First, the image of rural teachers and rural schools that they present is far more diverse than the nostalgic and sentimental vision of rural schools so common today. Indeed, most of the problems that trouble schools today were actually part of daily life in the rural schools of the past. Not only do many of the novels and reminiscences include passages revealing what was difficult and daunting about the teacher's life in the rural school, but the advice given in the texts, while phrased very positively, is evidently aimed at helping the teacher surmount these difficulties.

Second, it is remarkable to what extent many of these writers, whether novelists, teachers, or textbook writers (usually instructors at normal schools) held as a positive value what the more modern thinker or scholar would call sentimentality. Not only is the rural teacher often sentimentalized—that is, painted with a wash of one-sided praise and positive thinking—but the textbooks actually recommend the reading of sentimental novels of the schoolroom as ways to raise the tone of teachers minds and show them what they should try to achieve.

Perhaps this sentimental tone, common to both the novels and the textbooks, is part of the reason that we have remembered about the rural school what was "beautiful and good" and forgotten what was problematic.

I will consider three aspects of the image of rural teachers: their character; their concerns about discipline, order, and student behavior; and their preparation to teach. These are only discussed separately for the sake of convenience. Clearly the kind of person the teacher is and the teacher's own education are linked tightly to issues of classroom management.

The Character of the Teacher

The very use of the word "character" to describe what we might now call personality has its own set of connotations. Personality may simply refer to a set of individual qualities, innate or acquired through one's life experiences. Character is something to be created, worked on, developed, judged. It is good or bad, strong or weak, not simply (and less judgmentally) introverted or extroverted, friendly or quiet, as "personality" might be. The lengthy descriptions of the teacher's character found in the texts they were to use suggest that building strong characters for themselves was an important responsibility for teachers.

In fact, Lowth (1936), who had been the principal of the rural teacher training school at Janesville, Wisconsin, suggested that teachers score themselves on various aspects of their character and work to improve their scores.

> It would pay any teacher to make out a score card of say twenty-five personal qualities, and then check herself to see where she stands. Mark each attribute on the basis of one hundred. For example, a teacher might mark herself 100 on honesty but only 60 on initiative. She may be worth 95 in sympathy, but only 65 in accuracy. (p. 43)

Slacks (1938), who was professor of rural education at Iowa State Teachers College, gave a list of qualities necessary for the rural teacher, which is representative of those provided in nearly all the texts I encountered. He called for the teacher to be healthy (and health was considered to be the result of good personal hygiene), enthusiastic, alert, consistent, self-controlled, fair, good-natured, hardworking, orderly, honest and sincere, energetic, and sympathetic and patient.

Some of the most sentimental statements about the desired character of the rural teacher are found in the texts intended for use by the teachers themselves. For example, Kirkpatrick (1917) wrote:

> The teacher who has drunk deeply from sorrow's cup, and is rich in experience that has left him not hardened and embittered against the world, but softened and sweetened with a charity that looks for goodness in all men and all women . . . has a preparation for a life work that has for its accomplishment the building of a citizenship based upon the love of man for man. (p. 135)

Woofter (1936) called for dedication from teachers:

> Teaching is a great profession. . . . Human life is the greatest thing in the world, and he who is called to the training and development of human life has the greatest calling in the world. Only those who can so appreciate the greatness of teaching should enter the profession. (p. 25)

It seems a short step from the demand for such characteristics to the belief that teachers typically did possess them, especially when the texts that teachers studied recommended that they read and model themselves on sentimental novels, with heroes and heroines possessing all these traits. Many of these novels are no longer found in libraries. Some of those included by several of the textbook authors are: Elizabeth Enslow, *The Schoolhouse in the Foothills*; Bess Streeter Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*; Dan Stephens, *Phelps and His Teachers*; Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*; W.H. Smith, *The Evolution of Dodd*; and Angelina Wray, *Jean Mitchell's School*, as well as Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and Ralph Connor, *Glengarry School Days*, from the list of novels on which this study is based.

According to Lowth (1936, pp. 52-53), Wray's novel (*Jean Mitchell's School Days*) "exemplifies the everlasting truth that the teacher's personality is by far the largest factor in the work of the school," while Eggleston's (*The Hoosier Schoolmaster*) "sets forth some of those great and inevitable truths of our human relationships which all teachers need to know. The young instructor made good. Discover how he won out."

Teachers were told to read these novels, but not, it is important to note, to glean suggestions

for teaching from the descriptions of schooling which they contain. In fact, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1917), appearing on virtually every list of suggested novels, has as its lovely heroine a young teacher whose teaching is never described at all, but only acts as a hindrance to the development of her romance with the Virginia-born cowhand of the title. Reading this novel was recommended strictly as a guide to character development, particularly of that "womanly sweetness" and steadfastness of purpose which characterize the heroine.

The teachers described in the novels and memoirs, by contrast, are painted as quite ordinary persons, with characters no more or less developed than those of other people. Laura Ingalls Wilder, in her self-portrait in *These Happy Golden Years* (1943), is no paragon, but a young and inexperienced woman trying to survive her first teaching job from day to day. Though *Glengarry School Days* (1902) includes the portrait of one teacher who is well-educated and of admirable character, one of the other two masters described is friendly and pleasant, but not remarkable, while the other is weak and cruel, even sadistic.

Mary Ellen Chase, in her memoir *A Goodly Fellowship* (1939), told us that she approached her first teaching job, as a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, so frightened that if possible she would "then and there have run for cover, leaving the Buck's Harbor School to whatever fate awaited it" (p. 37). She referred to the "mental and physical agility [rather] than mere knowledge" which the school required of her (p. 39). The difficulty of accomplishing the prescribed program for all the classes in the available time, together with her own "weakness" in arithmetic, left her little time to think about her character, though she noted an improvement in her ability to be well-organized and to keep her mind on what she was doing.

Similarly, the rural Wisconsin teachers interviewed by Christensen (1986) told him about many aspects of their life and work in the schools, but nowhere did they speak of their character or its development as important to their work. They liked teaching or they did not, they loved children or they did not, they found the conditions difficult or they did not, but if they rated themselves on a scale of 1 to 100 and tried to improve their characters, they did not remember doing so as important to their teaching.

Thus the issue of the teacher's character development, emphasized so strongly by the authors of texts for teacher training, seems to have had little importance in the lives of the real teachers portrayed in fiction and memoir in this period. Its contribution, instead, has been to the sentimentalization of the image of rural teachers. Yet neither do the teachers portrayed in these sources match Tyack's (1974) image of "ne'er-do-wells or ignoramuses who would teach for a pittance under the eye and thumb of the community" (p. 14). Like teachers today, they seem to have been a varied group of ordinary individuals.

Discipline, Order and Student Behavior

A second aspect of the image of the teacher is that of discipline or student behavior. The nostalgic popular image of rural teachers gives them students who — unlike today's children — are well-behaved and eager to learn. Perhaps some of the boys are a bit rambunctious at times, but serious difficulties with discipline are not part of the picture. Contrary to this sentimental image, both the novels and the memoirs used in this study paint teachers as having a major focus on maintaining discipline. Far from presiding, gently but firmly, over quiet and well-behaved students whose cooperation can be taken for granted, they are often shown as using, and needing to use, harsh methods to control their classes.

In a vivid example from Wilder's *Farmer Boy* (1937), an incident from the childhood of Wilder's husband, Almanzo Wilder, is described. Almanzo was only six or eight years old when a kind and weak-looking master taught the local school. All went well until the winter term, when there was little farm work to do, and the oldest boys came to school for the first time.

> These big boys were sixteen or seventeen years old, and they came to school only in the middle of the winter term. They came to thrash the teacher and break up the school They boasted that no teacher could finish the winter term at that school, and no teacher ever had. (p. 46)

In fact, the last master to teach at the school had been injured so badly by the boys that he had later died. Little Almanzo was very much afraid of what would happen to the gentle school master in the inevitable conflict. He was surprised—as were the big boys—to learn that the master kept a blacksnake whip in his desk drawer and was ready to use it to drive his attackers out of the school.

Perhaps this was an extreme and unusual way to deal with such a problem, but the problem itself was by no means unique. Connor (1902) described the Glengarry School under three masters. The first, Archibald Munro, was respected by all, and was

> the only master who had ever been able to control, without at least one appeal to the trustees, the stormy tempers of the young giants that used to come to school during the winter months. (p. 14)

Munro was replaced by a new master who favored inflexible enforcement of numerous rules. He whipped so many of the smaller boys that the older boys left the school, considering it beneath their dignity to "carry [the master] out" (p. 118). However, a confrontation finally occurred when a little boy refused to put out his hand to be beaten, and the master felt that his entire authority was threatened. "I cannot have boys refusing to obey me in this school" (p. 118), he said, and treated the offending boy so brutally that the oldest of the remaining boys attacked him, knocked him to the floor, and were preparing to tie him up when they were interrupted by an adult.

Mary Ellen Chase, later a novelist and an English professor at Smith College, was required by her father to teach school for a year after her first year of college. He left her on the steps of the Maine school house where she was to teach with "no aid but a stout razor strap" (p.36). She was afraid, so afraid that she raged at "certain boys of sixteen or older who otherwise might have been at sea" (p. 36), flourished the strap, and had no more difficulty that term. Later in the book, she described a school in Montana, and said admiringly of the principal, "She could use a wide leather strap across the knees of unruly boys, who sat calmly in the chair without the least outcry" (p. 186).

In other cases, gentler methods of gaining the cooperation of students came into play. Laura Ingalls Wilder went at the age of sixteen to teach her own school (Wilder, 1943). She had trouble controlling the oldest boy, and wished she could give him the whipping he needed. She was too small to do it, and had to find other ways to deal with him. When she asked her parents for advice, her father said,

> Everybody's born free, like it says in the Declaration of Independence. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink, and good or bad, nobody but Clarence can ever boss Clarence. You better just manage. (p. 55)

And her mother advised her:

> It's attention he wants, that's why he cuts up.... It's all in that word "manage." (p. 54)

Laura shortened Clarence's assignments, commiserated with him on how hard it was to catch up once you were behind, and ignored his challenges. Soon he did the work and improved his behavior.

The textbooks, too, contain many references to discipline and suggestions for controlling students' behavior. In his text, *Everyday Problems of the Country Teacher* (1936), Lowth wrote:

> [T]here is something radically wrong with the teacher's spirit, aims, and plans, if she needs to give much attention to order. In an orderly school the children are busy of their own volition. (pp. 187-88)

He went on to describe "disorderly teachers" as those who were "loud-talking" and "irascible," and to attribute disorder among pupils to lack of "proper treatment and training." He held that it was "rare indeed to find a pupil who persists in disorderly practices simply out of a spirit of meanness." He suggested that most problems with pupils could be solved by giving them appropriate assignments, and described deprivation of privileges and "a private interview" as "drastic treatment" which would rarely be needed (p. 189).

Interestingly, however, Lowth went on to further discussion of issues of punishment and discipline, implying that these *would* be issues of significance for teachers. He described the circumstances in which the teacher might be forced to punish a student, and ruled out as inappropriate such disciplinary tactics as threatening and nagging, sarcasm and ridicule, humiliation and physical punishment. Thus the sentimental view of the firm and friendly teacher working with cooperative pupils is placed next to, but not reconciled with, the image of a teacher dealing with students who are found "lying, cheating, [using] profane language on the playground, marring furniture and outbuildings, [and giving] impertinent responses" (p. 193).

Woofter (1917), Dean of the School of Education at the University of Georgia, began his chap-

ter on discipline with the statement: "Discipline is the feature of the school which first puts the young teacher on trial" (p. 105). He proceeded to define the purpose of discipline as the production of "the harmony of life." Yet the 27 pages of his chapter provided a wide range of suggestions to assist the teacher in controlling the behavior of students, including, in its final pages, the statement that "corporal punishment...should not be entirely forbidden" (p. 131). Though it was to be used as a penultimate resort—expulsion being the only harsher penalty—some "offenders" would require it, at least up to the age of puberty.

Thus, the image of the firm teacher, presiding over well-behaved and cooperative children, is not supported by these sources. Teachers varied in their approach to discipline and found in their schools both children whose behavior enabled the orderly running of the school, and those whose behavior made order difficult to maintain. Neither the disciplinary techniques they used nor the influence of their characters produced the well-disciplined and effective classrooms that the sentimental or nostalgic image of the rural teacher would require.

The rules that these teachers were enforcing with such methods of discipline were restrictive, and took little account of what the children might want or need. Perfect compliance was expected, if not received, and disobedience was understood as a moral fault.

> No whispering permitted in school, and no fidgeting. Everyone must be perfectly still and keep his eyes fixed on his lessons. (Wilder, 1933, p. 8)

> No speaking in school unless you raise your hand for permission to speak; written excuses must be presented for absence or tardiness; no sound should be heard in the school. (Connor, p. 83)

Silence, immobility, and order are presented in these sources as essential to schooling, even though teachers must use strong disciplinary methods to achieve them. Laura Ingalls Wilder feared she would incur the wrath of her school superintendent if she allowed her students to warm themselves at the stove in her cold prairie school (Wilder, 1943, p. 80).

Woofter (1917) wrote:

> Formerly, school government was one of repression. If a pupil was caught looking out of the window, he was called to book summarily, and if caught drawing pictures he might expect to have his ears boxed. "Absolutely still" was the order. (p. 112)

He rejoiced in the more enlightened attitudes of 1917, but went on to describe a formidable list of rules for good behavior that were to be developed as habits in the children. They were to be prompt and regular in their attendance, "no lagging or straggling" (p. 111). They were to be working busily at all times, often because the work was interesting to them, but sometimes simply because one must work. They were to produce only neat and orderly work. They were to keep silence, avoiding "whispering and other unnecessary communication" (p. 113). There were to be proper times for interruptions, and pupils were to be trained to wait for those times (p. 114). Later he mentioned such offenses as "whispering, note-writing, leaving the room too often, [and] noisy walking" as reasons for punishment (p. 126).

Learning, like behavior, was considered a matter of discipline, and students who had not mastered their lessons were subject to whipping, shaming, and other penalties. Almanzo Wilder was very fond of the gentle master with the black-snake whip in his desk because he "never whipped little boys who forgot how to spell a word" (Wilder, 1933, p. 5). By implication, other masters did so.

Similarly, Wilder's difficulties with a recalcitrant pupil were not concerned with active misbehavior, but involved his failure to learn the lessons she assigned him (1943). As mentioned above, she would have whipped him if she had been big enough. There is a clear assumption that failure to learn is caused by laziness or idleness, defects of character.

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Qualifications of Teachers

A final aspect of the sentimental image of teachers of the past is that they were well qualified for their work, perhaps more so than the teachers of today. We would like to think of them as well-educated, passing down significant knowledge to students. Yet the teachers described in these sources are young and have had little advanced education.

"Anyhow, she knows how to teach. She has a certificate" (Wilder, 1941, p. 125). This was the comment of an older child about a new teacher. The certificate, however, had been obtained by passing a test on the content of the graded school curriculum, which in many cases the new teacher had just completed herself. No added knowledge, either in the content areas or in pedagogy, was required.

When Wilder was finishing school, she went to town on Saturday and took a test for certification. Her score would be the only determinant of her qualifications (Wilder, 1943, p. 148). By this time, however, she had already taught a term in a country school. She felt perfectly qualified to do this, as she had always been a good student and had progressed further than any of the children whom she was asked to teach (some of whom were older than she was).

In Stratton-Porter's *A Daughter of the Land* (1918), two sisters persuade their brother to teach a school neither of them wants to take. Each girl has had a summer at Normal School, where the content of their years of schooling was reviewed, but the brother has had no training at all.

> Well, Hiram had taken the county examination, as all pupils of the past ten years had when they finished the county schools. It was a test required to prove whether they had done their work well. Hiram held a certification to teach for one year, given to him by the County Superintendent when he passed the examination. (p. 98)

Mary Ellen Chase was even less well-prepared when she went to teach in a Maine village school. It was her father's view that a girl should teach school for a year or two before entering college or after her first or second year of college. Chase had always been a poor student in mathematics and did not know how to do all that she had to teach. Her first year of teaching found her "weeping at night over bank discount and compound proportion" (Chase, 1939, p. 43). Reminiscing about the pupils in her first school, she wrote,

> Three of them are teachers who, I trust, have never emulated my desperate and stumbling efforts either at discipline or at instruction. (p. 45)

It was during the period described in these novels and memoirs that teacher training began to be available and increasingly required, and that its length gradually increased. For example, not until 1934 was two years of training required in Wisconsin (Christensen, 1986). Earlier than this, however, at least some brief periods of training began to be required for the better teaching jobs. For example, in Stratton-Porter's Indiana at the turn of the century, a girl who wished to teach in a desirable school in the fall and who had finished her own schooling in the spring had to spend eight weeks of the summer at the Normal School in the city (Stratton-Porter, 1918, p. 25).

In *Daughter of the Land*, one of the sisters helps her untrained brother get ready to teach. "He is brushing up a little nights, and I am helping him on 'theory'" (Stratton-Porter, 1918, p. 114). Presumably she learned the "theory" during the eight-week summer session of normal school, which she had just attended.

Thirty years after her first year of teaching, Mary Ellen Chase wrote that a young teacher's best plan was to emulate her own instructors. Her common sense, initiative, and enthusiasm would then help her in solving any problems that might arise (Chase, 1939, p. 59). Thus, Laura Ingalls Wilder, opening her first school, "thought it best to maintain the routine of the town school and have each person come forward to recite" (Wilder, 1943, p. 18). She solemnly intoned, "Third Reading Group, come forward," and watched one little girl make her way to the front of the room.

Mabel Carney (1912), who was director of the Country School Department at Illinois State Normal University, said of these teachers:

> It is true, as frequently maintained, that country teachers are young and inexperienced and poorly prepared for their work. But it is also true that as a group they are filled with a great sincerity. (p. 195)

Conclusion

The image of teachers presented in these sources, then, is far from the nostalgic one held by many Americans today. Rather than being competent, dedicated, and morally superior people who maintained discipline in classes of well-behaved and willing students, teachers are described as poorly prepared both academically and in pedagogical training and as struggling with disobedient students for the control of the school. The historical reality of the rural school and the rural teacher is summarized by Mary Ellen Chase (1939):

> The schools of such a village were simply its schools. They were hewn out of respectability and governed by necessity. No one thought of them as either good or bad, and without doubt they possessed qualities of both. (p. 5)

> The rural school has gone never to return, at least in its original state. It has become an outworn institution, to be regarded by those who knew it more with sentiment than respect. (p. 52)

The nostalgic image of these teachers' character which comes across most strongly in the textbooks intended for their use is revealed as a product of the sentimentalism that shaped the views of professors of education and perhaps some earlier novelists, rather than those of the teachers themselves. Like teachers today, these rural teachers worked hard under difficult conditions. They were never the paragons we might like to recall.

Why, then, might Americans hold a sentimental and nostalgic view of our educational past? If there are two perspectives on history, one which sees its course as a progress toward a future golden age and one which traces its decline from a golden age of the past, the first has been central to American ideology. Always Americans have claimed to be moving from less to more, from worse to better, fulfilling our country's manifest destiny. As de Tocqueville pointed out in 1840, Americans believe that in our nation human perfectibility is being enacted. However, this ideology leads to frequent frustration. What is one to believe when the perfection we seek does not appear, when somehow the golden age does not arrive?

Perhaps it is in these moments of frustration and fear that we seek the golden age in our past, hiding in a cloud of sentiment the indications that it never existed at all. As we are more and more often bombarded with criticisms of our schools, teachers, and students, we feel more and more strongly the need to believe that once, if only in the past, our schools approached the ideal we set for them. If that ideal was once achieved, perhaps it can be regained. If it has never been, then what we ask of schools and teachers may be forever out of reach.

The task of searching the history of rural schools for what was good about them is beyond the scope of my inquiry. Yet there are elements of the portraits of schools presented in these texts which call for our consideration. The rural schools they describe, as Mary Ellen Chase pointed out, are very much part of the communities they served. The community and the parents were responsible to the school, and the school and teacher to them. The schools reflected what parents and teachers believed was right, rather than the views of educational experts, industrial leaders, or national politicians. Thus the schools enhanced, rather than decreased, that liberty which seems an essential part of our heritage as Americans.

Tyack (1974) observed that this tight connection between school and community had both advantages and disadvantages. In a cohesive community, the school reaped the benefits of cohesiveness. Teachers, parents, and community members could work well together for what they all perceived as the welfare of the children and of the community as a whole. But if the community was at odds within itself, all would suffer as the school became a battleground on which community dissension was played out.

Today, the issue of returning power over schools from the educational experts and bureaucrats of the "one best system" to parents and communities is undergoing active debate. From large-scale efforts, like the Chicago school reform, to involve parents and community members in the governance of schools, to calls for voucher systems and individual parent choice of schools inside and outside the public sector, change in this direction is occurring and likely to continue. It would seem to be a good time to take a careful look — not a sentimental or nostalgic look, but a realistic and critical look — at what the small community schools and teachers of the past were really like.

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